The Legend of Sardanapalus: From ancient Assyria to European stages and screens

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Abstract

"Adieu, Assyria! / I loved thee well". These were the last words of king Sardanapalus, the last king of Assyria, according to Lord Byron. Throughout the centuries, Europe was confronted with the tragic story of Mesopotamia's last monarch, a king more effeminate than a woman, a lascivious and idle man, a governor who loathed all expressions of militarism and war. But this story was no more than it proposed to be: a story, not history. Sardanapalus was not even real! The Greeks conceived him; artists, play writers, and cineastes preserved him.

Through the imaginative minds of early Modern and Modern historians, artists and dramaturgs, Sardanapalus' legend endured well into the 20th-century in several different media. Even after the first excavations in Assyria, and the exhumation of its historical archives, where no king by the name of Sardanapalus was recorded, fantasy continued to surpass history.

Keywords: Reception of Antiquity, Mesopotamia, Greek Mythology, Opera, Italian Cinema.

1. Introduction

Who was Sardanapalus? To speak about him means to immerse oneself in the history of the ancient world and the genesis of Eastern and Western cultures. Mesopotamia gave the world one of its first empire, controlled by the Assyrians; their immense power and massive influence were destined to create a resonance for centuries to come. Cultural alterity between the so-called Eastern and Western worlds was already noticeable in Antiquity during the Persian wars, a time when the Hellenic world fought the Orient. The clash contributed to creating various misconceptions, ideas and *biased* tales about the Middle Eastern peoples and empires, such as the Assyrian and the Babylonian.

Sardanapalus was one of those creations. In the accounts of his life are present all the aspects of imagination, fantasy and creativity that contribute to the birth of a legend.

2. Rivalry and ambition: the downfall of the Assyrian empire

The death of Assyrian king Esarhaddon in c. 669 BC marked the ascension of his elder son Ashurbanipal, to whom historiography usually attributes the apogee of the neo-Assyrian empire, given that during his reign Assyria grew to its maximum extension. The renowned monarch[1] is known for his successful military campaigns that drove to the expansion of Assyria's borders (Brinkman 1984, 85-92), his capacity to rule and to subdue his enemies, and for his love for culture. Besides a faithful servant of his gods, a provider of his people and a caretaker of his/the god's land, as a Mesopotamian king should be, Ashurbanipal was also a scribe[2], and an avid collector of manuscripts: his is one of the first world's library, containing more than thirty thousand tablets (Finkel 2018, 80 and ff. and Taylor 2018, 94).

His conquests and victories were numerous, including the defeat of Libya and Egypt at the beginning of his reign and the triumph over the Elamite king Teumman in the battle of Til-Tuba, in 653 BC. Nevertheless, the most problematic and conspicuous victory was the one obtained against his younger brother, Šamaš-šumu-ukin. Before his death, Esarhaddon settled the future of Assyria dividing the empire between his two sons: the older would be in charge of Assyria, the core of the country, and the younger would rule over Babylonia (Fig. 1). However, it did not take long after the death of the sovereign for the rivalry between brothers to begin. The conflict, a true tale of jealousy and ambition, a family dispute surrounded with grief and sorrow, would forever mark the imaginary of the West. The story echoed through space and time, collecting different inputs over the following centuries, and reaching Europe's (and the United States') fantasist mind in the imperialist ages of the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, who is not familiar with Eugène Delacroix's 1827 (Fig. 2) painting *La mort de Sardanapale*

1 Presently, Ashurbanipal's reputation and celebrity are well recognized due to widely advertised British Museum exhibition "I am Ashurbanipal" (8 November 2018 - 21 February 2019).

2 In ancient Mesopotamia not all kings were scribes, thus the importance of this trace of Ashurbanipal.

(sometimes credited as Ashurbanipal)?

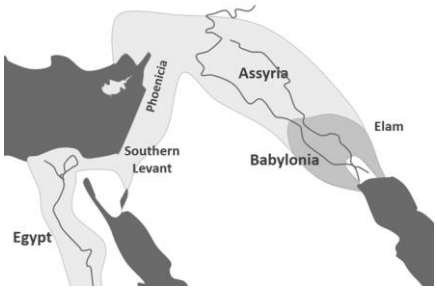

Fig. 1: Estimated maximum extension of Ashurbanipal's empire with the highlighted area showing Šamaš-šumu-ukin's approximate dominion in the south (Babylonia). In dark grey are represented Mesopotamia's natural borders: The Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea (plus the Red Sea bordering Egypt. Map made by the author.

The suggestive title of Delacroix's work is, however deceitful, as we shall see. The conflict would not result in Ashurbanipal's death but on his brother's *possible* suicide. After Šamaš-šumu-ukin's enthronement in Babylonia in 668 BC, the increasing involvement of Ashurbanipal in the internal affairs of his realm as well as his delay in helping him when he needed (Brinkman 1984, 83-92), led him to express his desire to set Babylonia free from the Assyrian yoke. An upheaval took place in 652 BC (Caramelo 2002, 232-240) forcing Ashurbanipal to drive his armies south and to impose a siege on the capital city of Babylon that lasted for more than two years. After a long period of war between the siblings, with victories and defeats on both sides, Šamaš-šumu-ukin saw his allies gradually shorten, his power quickly diminished, and his city slowly lost. The siege imposed by Ashurbanipal brought famine and disease to Babylon's population, and ultimately a conflagration would devastate the city and dictate the end of Šamaš-šumu-ukin's rule. We do not know with certainty if the monarch committed suicide or if he was eventually pushed into the flames (Von Soden 1972, 85) but all points out to the fact that he died during the fire.

In the aftermath of the combat, in 648 BC, the victorious Ashurbanipal assigned a subordinate, the mysterious Kandalanu, to the throne of the fallen city. Assyria and Babylonia slowly recovered from the Great Rebellion, but the strength of the neo-Assyrian empire was forever slackened. The years of war led to severe economic penalties with the exhausting of resources, to administrative problems, and the decline of Assyria's control over his subdues. Although this decay began before the civil war, the conflict marked the end of a period of apogee in Assyria's authority and shaped a new order of relationships between the powers of the Near East.

Ashurbanipal and Kandalanu both died in 627 BC, leaving Assyria and Babylonia orphaned of figures of authority. The throne of Nineveh, the capital of the empire, was occupied by several monarchs who were unable to raise Assyria to the power it had achieved with his predecessors, and a new dynasty raised in Babylonia, with kings Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II imposing their power over the Near East and determining the end of their northern rival. In 612 BC, an alliance between Nabopolassar of Babylon and the Mede king Cyaxares led to the downfall of Nineveh and the death of the last great king of Assyria[3] Sîn-šar-iškun (Curtis 2003, 158).

The episodes comprised in the short period between Esarhaddon's death in 669 BC and the conquest of Nineveh in 612 BC excited the minds of the historical actors that dealt closely with the Mesopotamian agents. They form the basis of a western romanticise tale, a story of love, pain, pleasure, dispute, and tragedy that endured in time and shaped our views of the East.

3. From history to legend: the romanticism of ancient Greek writers

Ashurbanipal's political influence resounds in different historical vehicles as the Old Testament: it is possible that the Asnappar of Esdras is, in fact, the Assyrian king (Esd. 4, 10). But the most visible evidence of the Mesopotamian sovereign's prominence and the repercussion of the events that surrounded his governance is the birth of the Greek legend of Sardanapalus. How do we know the latter evokes the former?

The first reference to this somewhat mysterious character dates to the 5th-century BC. Herodotus speaks of the king of Nineveh, Sardanapalus' many richnesses (*The Persian Wars* 2.150.9). Later (c. beginning of the 3rd-century BC), a legend preserved in the demotic script in different Aramaic papyruses betrays a romantic tale of the adventures and misfortunes of two brothers: Sarbanabal and Sarmuge. Do the anthroponyms Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin resound in the names of the characters of the demotic tale? It all points out to this, considering the discourse of Sarmuge to his elder brother:

> I am the king of (!) Babylon,

3 Assyria gave his last breath with Ashur-uballit II when he was stationed around Harran. But despite this remainder of authority, the empire had already fallen.

and you are the governor of Ni <ne> veh,

my tributary *city*.

Why should I pay homage to you?

(Steiner and Nims 1985, 71).

The story leads to disagreements between the siblings and ends with Sarmuge expressing his wish to build up a room, threw down tar and pitch and set fire to it.

The most elaborate text about Sardanapalus is, notwithstanding, that of Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who writes his report about the last Assyrian king in the 1st-century BC. In his *magnum opus, Bibliotheca Historica* Diodorus claims to have been inspired by the words of Ctesias of Cnidus, a physician who lived during the time of Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II and whose work has been lost. Reading Diodorus' tale, one is confronted with the transformation of the paradigm of Assyrian royalty and with the mixture of ingredients from different periods of Mesopotamia's History.

Fig. 2: Eugène Delacroix's *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1828) portraying the final moments of Sardanapalus' life. The work was inspired by Byron's play *Sardanapalus* (1821) who was, in turn, influenced by Diodorus Siculus' account. Louvre Museum.

We must stress that the Greeks had their very own vision of the world. Herodotus claims to have written his *Histories* in order "that great and marvelous deeds, some displayed by the Hellenes, some by the barbarians" (*The Histories* 1.1.0) not be forgotten. His statement clearly points out to a polarisation between the Hellenes and the Barbarians, among which the Assyrians were obviously included. The perception of a cultural and social distinction that would eventually lead the Greeks to assume an ethnocentric vision was certainly intensified by the Persian wars (Yang 2007, 119). Adding to the symptom of a certain Hellenic pretentiousness was the distance that separated authors like Herodotus, Ctesias, and Diodorus from the events that led to the fall of the Assyrian empire at the beginning of the 7th-century BC.

Mesopotamian kings were seen through the Greek eye as dull and effeminate despots who had led their empires to ruin and were not capable of securing the welfare of their populations. Let us remind ourselves that the Greeks had a political and social organisation that deeply contrasted with their middle eastern counterpart; the Athenian Democracy had been established in the 5th-century BC, and there was a clear distinction between the realms of action of men – the military and political spheres – and women – the *oikos*. The subversion of gender roles was one of the ways found by the Greeks to express their perplexity when facing the cultural differences, often considered bizarre, of the eastern *other*. A figure such as Sardanapalus would thus be as strange as the Assyrian Semiramis, the first and most powerful queen of the East, a concept of sovereignty foreign to the Greeks.

Thus, the second volume of *Bibliotheca Historica* introduces us to a king living among women, dressing as such, using a soft voice and attiring in a way that would be considered unnatural for a Greek man. All this was but a fantasy created by the wondrous mind of the Classic authors who found in writing a way to express their concerns, who sought in myth and legend a means to explain their grandeur and to comprehend the demise of others. If Semiramis was strange[4], stranger would have been Sardanapalus.

According to Diodorus, when Sardanapalus' Mede satrap and general Arbaces saw him mingling in his palace with the women (Diodorus, 1993, 2.24), a revolt was set in motion. Nineveh was subjected to an assault by the Medes, who allied with the Babylonian priest Belesys, and Sardanapalus was faced with a dilemma: to fight or to capitulate. Firstly, the king urges his soldiers to battle; though his efforts are not enough to drive the enemies away. With his chances of winning diminishing rapidly, Sardanapalus takes a decision that highlights the romantic tone of the tale and appeals to the imagination of the reader. Abandoning hope (Diodorus, 1993, 2.27), the king locked himself in a chamber of the palace with his treasures and concubines, lightning up a pyre and sealing his fate as well as that of Assyria – the capital Nineveh burned to the ground in the consequent fire.

The legend of Sardanapalus recounted numerous times throughout the Classical world after the publication of Diodorus' work, invariably contained three vital elements: the king's attitude of

4 Semiramis was considered the first queens of Asia. Despite her government and authority, the legends about this female ruler highlighted her lascivious behaviour, laying at night with many men only to abandon them the day after.

detachment; the fire of Nineveh; and the climate of feast before the fall – which can also be seen as a Greek critic to the Mesopotamian *free a*nd lavish style of life. For instance, the Latin writer Justin recalls how Sardanapalus "first looked about for a hiding-place" (Justinus, 1853, 1.3) instead of fighting, an attitude more befitting a woman. His fellow historian Juvenal remembers the long "loves and the banquets and the down cushions of Sardanapalus" (Juvenal, 2014, 10.346); and Polybius stresses his hedonistic way of life, attributing to him the epitaph: "Mine are they yet the meats I ate, my wanton sport above, the joy of love" (Políbio, 1982, 8.10.3-4).

It is clear from all these narratives that Sardanapalus' character merges three different Assyrian monarchs: Ashurbanipal, one of the most important kings of the neo-Assyrian empire, as we have seen; Šamaš-šumu-ukin, the king who saw the palace of Babylon being set to fire, and possibly died in it; Sîn-šar-iškun, the last king of Nineveh. From Babylon, we were, therefore, slowly driven to Nineveh, and from History, Greek fantasy took us to legend. The Greeks set the tone. In a way, the Greeks (as well as the Old Testament) transformed Assyria: fable and folklore would prevail for *circa* two millennia until excavations in Assyria proved the inexistence of such a sovereign as Sardanapalus (or Semiramis).

When the English explorer Austen Layard started archaeological excavations in Nimrud, in 1845, (not knowing what was the exact city he was excavating), the deteriorated state of some slabs and inscriptions and the confirmation that one of its palaces had been destroyed in a major conflagration led his colleagues to believe that he was confronted with a concrete proof of the Classical story of Sardanapalus and the burning of Nineveh, primarily suggesting to identify the *tell* as such (Larsen 2016, 78).

Fantasy had triumphed[5].

4. Europe and Mesopotamia's exoticism – a luxurious fiction

Lacking concrete evidence of Assyria and Babylonia, Renascence[6] and Enlightenment authors and artists were left to wonder what these ancient countries looked like and what were their inhabitant's anxieties and desires. Although fragile, the Classics provided an answer, and from the conjugation of their reports on Mesopotamia and the imagination of dramaturgs and cineastes legend would endure well into the 20th-century.

5. On stages

The first modern tragedies on the life of Sardanapalus came to light in 17th-century Italy, closely following Diodorus' and Justinus' words. Carlo Maderni's libretto (with music from Domenico Freschi, 1678) set the pattern for the operas that would follow, all imbibed in an aura of eroticism and exoticism (Fig. 3). Sardanapalus was portrayed as a king eager for sex, posing like a woman, in a mixture of comedy, perversity, voyeurism, and tragedy (Piffaut 2015).

The Assyrian monarch embodied the "mostro il più lascivo di sfrenata libidine" (Maderni 1681, 5), an image very significant of the concept Europe had of this eastern *other*, and of the elite which governed it. Feasting with the women and neglecting the masculinised side of his reign (which urged to war and military action) was Sardanapalus' and Middle Eastern authorities' way of government. In Maderni and Freschi's play, Sardanapalus, watching Nineveh crumble, decides to organise a true massacre, setting fire to the palace. Hence, the Assyrian empire did not end without a show. A moralist view was hence highlighted – all eastern empires were doomed to fade under their moral decadence.


SARDANAPALO
Drama per Musica
Da recitarsi nel Teatro de Tempe-
rati di Verona l'anno 1681.
DI CARLO MADERNI.

Fig. 3: Superior part of the frontispiece to the 17th-century Italian opera *Sardanapalo*, presented in Verona, composed by Domenico Freschi with libretto by Carlo Maderni (Piffaut 2015, 50).

By the beginning of the 19th-century, the *Orientalist* vision that had set in Europe deepened the significance of Sardanapalus' eastern *persona*. In 1821, Victorian poet Lord Byron launched his *Sardanapalus*, adding to the famous legend the character of Myrrah, which would be, from then on, Sardanapalus' counterpart, his *partner in crime*. The choice of Myrrah's origins was not innocent;

5 1842 was a turning point in the long history of reception of Mesopotamia. The first excavation led by French consul Paul Émile Botta opened a new era in the knowledge of the country between the Tigre and the Euphrates. The Old Testament narrative and the Classical tales would slowly be replaced by the stories reported in the cuneiform inscriptions, which spoke of the events and characters of this civilization as seen and understood by its own agents. For the first time in twenty-five centuries Mesopotamia had a voice!

6 Boccaccio, for instance, speaks extensively of Sardanapalus (Terrusi 2012).

despite a slave, the combative spirit and impetuous temperament of Sardanapalus' favourite were certainly deserving of her Greek background. Myrrah's discourse - "I'm a Greek, and how should I fear death?" (Byron 1823, 34) - had an intentional pun. The concubine was the active and militant voice in the play as opposed to Sardanapalus' effeminacy, androgenic nature, and inactiveness[7].

Let us not forget that in this period the Ottoman threat extended through Europe, and Greece emerged in a fight for its independence from the Turkish aggressors. Lord Byron was an active voice in the conflict (Carman 2016, p. 237; Poole 1999, p. 167) and thus, the play shows a concern with the problems Europe faced. The British poet found a creative and clever way to express the dichotomies of East and West, and the paradigm of a cultural divergence that had been noted since Classical times. As in Diodorus Siculus, as in Maderni and Freschi's accounts, the city was condemned, and even the Euphrates seemed eager to precipitate its end, flooding in a destructive rage. After assembling a pyre around his throne, Sardanapalus withdraw with Myrrah to the throne room, and she finally stirred up the flame.

After Byron's creation, many operas would arise from the complicity shared between Sardanapalus and Myrrah, such as Hector Berlioz (1830), Franz Liszt (1849), Peter Ludwig Hertel (1867), or Giuseppe Libani (1887), to name just a few. All portrayed the final fall of Nineveh and Assyria as a direct consequence from its pomp and ostentation, its lack of moral values, and, in a certain way, its innate tendency to sin, to prevaricate, and to failure. The more Assyrian/eastern monarchs raised, the more spectacular was their fall.

6. On screens

Despite the excavations that granted Assyria and Babylonia a tangible image, during the 19th and 20th-centuries, Sardanapalus's legend was not to cease or be forgotten; the difference was that now he would frequently be depicted mixed with historical appointments that were otherwise absent. The 1910s and 1960s Italian movies are a clear example of the complexity and evolution of Sardanapalus' *persona* and the introduction of aspects that pointed out the disclosure of Assyria's monumental culture.

The first archaeological experience in Assyria took place in 1842, in Khorsabad, a city excavated by French consul Paul Émille Botta. Three years later, the British diplomat Austen Layard uncovered parts of ancient Nimrud, and in 1849 Nineveh was found. Although Byron's play was composed previously to the campaigns in Assyrian soil, the multiple productions in the years to follow, in Europe and the United States (Stauffer 2011), would slowly start to incorporate in its scenarios elements that remitted to the culture uncovered during the first excavations. The so-called *lamassu* (the giant winged bull which used to protect the entrances of palaces and temples in ancient Mesopotamia) appeared in many theatrical sets of the later decades of the 19th-century, together with the *apkallu* (also a protective spirit, a sage, a hybrid being).

Parallel to the physical discover of Mesopotamia were the philological breakthroughs which allowed officially to consider cuneiform's decipherment in 1857. However, although cuneiform tablets were decoded and translated, and Mesopotamia's history and culture were for the first time *truly* known, the myths created by the Greeks would never fade. The world was confronted with the inexistence of characters such as Nimrod, Ninus, Semiramis, Ninyas or Sardanapalus, but the spectacle world of arts and media was not prepared to face reality. In truth, the reality was never the aim! Hence, arts and media decided to ignore History, or, to the put in a gentler way, opted to continue fomenting creativeness, fantasising about the distant *other* in the same way they always had.

The birth of cinema provided yet another vehicle to portray Sardanapalus' tragedy. Curiously, movies centred in the king of Assyria are both Italian productions. *Sardanapalo Re dell'Assiria*, a short movie from director Giuseppe de Liguoro, which premiered in 1910, and *Le sette folgori di Assur*, from Silvio Amadio, which debuted in 1962. The two show clear influences from Byron's work; the stories revolve around the affair of the king with a slave. The fact that they both correspond to Italian creations is certainly due to the necessity of screenwriters and producers to highlight their countries Classical roots, searching heroes and heroines from Antiquity's mythology. Let us also remember the legacy of Italian operas and its influence on the media (and in cinema) still nowadays. On the other hand, the so-called *peplum* genre also provided the ideal ambient to bring to the screen legendary figures from the ancient world.

From the two, Amadio's is the one which shows more originally. The story focuses on a young girl whose village is destroyed in an Assyrian raid. Taken to the empire capital of Nineveh, the girl, Myrrah, soon captures the attention and affection of prince Shamash, the younger brother of the king Sardanapalus, who also displays a love interest for the girl. While Shamash is discussing with Sardanapalus his government over Babylonia and

7 Sardanapalus posture is visible when he declares "I live in peace and pleasure: what can man do more?" (Byron 1823, 35).

his independence as king, the love both share for Myrrah ends up conflicting in the situation, and a war brakes up between the two. General Arbace, conspiring to take the throne, orders the killing of Shamash during the war between Assyria and Babylonia, and the cleavage deepens. Sardanapalus, suffering over his brother's fate, and fearing his population's demise, conjures the gods, and destroys the statue of Assur, the patron deity of Assyria. The divine response arrives in the way of a massive storm, while enemies suddenly surround Sardanapalus' town. Meanwhile, Myrrah falls into the affection of the king, who decides to offer a great banquet during the tempest (Fig. 4). In the end, the city burns in flames.

Fig. 4: Myrrah and Sardanapalus (Mirra and Sardanapalo) as portrayed in the Italian movie *Le sette folgori di Assur*. The king offers an exquisite banquet before the city fall. Still from *Le sette folgori di Assur* (English title: *War Gods of Babylon*), 1962: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=591yZzxWisg&t=2328s

This screenplay takes us back to an old episode of Mesopotamia's history, which we have already explored. Indeed, the originality of this picture is the amalgam of historical facts with mythical ones. The tale of the two brothers (Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin, vide supra) absent during centuries is finally recovered, after the decipherment of cuneiform tablets. The struggle between the two is mixed with the fable of Ctesias and Diodorus and other interesting elements. Historical aspects such as the evocation of Esarhaddon, the father of the two siblings, and the depiction of the city, which although displaying Classical architecture, has many sculptures in Assyrian or Persian style, constitutes a somewhat objective revision of the legend forged during Classical age.

Also, in Amadio's film the final destruction of Nineveh originates from the anger of the gods, and particularly from that of Assur, now recognised as the ancient *national* deity of Assyria (contrarily to the one mentioned in Diodorus Siculus' report, Belus). The love triangle of *Le sette folgori di Assur*, on the other hand, adds a tone simultaneously softer and dramatic to Sardanapalus' story. Apart from the political disputes between the two siblings, it was the fight for Myrrah's affection that led to the tragic death of Shamash, whose severed head was displayed before the city, and the subsequent Sardanapalus' rage (followed by divine punishment).

Moreover, in the 1962's film, there was no way Sardanapalus could continue being portrayed as an effeminate and idle monarch. All the reliefs exhumed in Assyria showed the king as a virile man, killing lions and leading bathes. Thus, in *Le sette folgori di* Assur, the monarch displays all the necessary requisites of a *traditional* monarch. However, although Sardanapalus (Ashurbanipal) recovers his masculinity, the luxurious, exquisite tendencies, the promiscuity, the bacchanals, and the city fall persist. Why? Because the East would always be the *other* in European conception and its extravagant way of life, enhanced by the paradigms set by *Orientalism* would prevail in the 20th and 21st-century.

More than twenty-five centuries after Nineveh's conquest by the Persians in 612 BC, fascination surrounding its fall persisted. What was more interesting and appealing: To show a city taken by foreign troops without putting much of a fight or to represent the monarch of an empire setting fire to its own capital, locked with his lover in his chambers (or perishing in a tempest and conflagration)?

Fantasy, creativity, fiction, and imagination captured the attention of Europe during centuries. Theatre and cinema spectators watched delightedly to the fall of the last empire of Mesopotamia through a legend that covered Assyria in a whimsical garment.

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